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NOTES FROM ALASKA.

THE following notes on the Tlinkits of Alaska are the result of a journey made in the year 1886 among the Tlinkits. The unfailing and positive sign which shows that a child is born to be a medicine-man is the existence of a peculiar mark on the body, and the infant showing such a mark from the time of earliest childhood is educated for the position. Long fasts are undergone, the virtues of the charms are taught, and he shakes the rattle under the guidance of some veteran doctor at the bedside of the sick, until the patient dies, or the spirit is supposed to be driven away, which usually amounts to the same thing, and then the unhappy man, who has been found and thrown into a hole in the ground, accused of having "witched" the sick one, is allowed to die; whereas, had the condition of the patient improved, the "witcher" would have had his bonds loosened proportionately as health improved. It was only quite recently that Mr. Austin, the Sitka missionary, was called by one of the boys at the Sitka mission to release a man who was accused of witching a squaw, then at the point of death. The victim was found lying in a deep hole, his hands tied behind his back to the ankles, a position which he had kept for three days. Military force was called in, and the man released. The ceremonies attending the building of a house, as practised previous to 1867, are described as follows: When a chief or wealthy man has decided upon the site, the relations and friends are notified to appear at a certain date on the chosen spot. He then addresses them at great length, referring with great pride to the various deeds of his ancestors, and promising to so conduct himself as to add to the lustre which the possession of such a family name reflects upon him.

The rectangular space for the building is then cleared, a spot for the fireplace designated, and four holes dug, wherein the corner posts are to be set, and then comes the most shocking part of the performance. A slave, either man or woman, who has been captured in war, or is even a descendant of such a slave, is blindfolded and compelled to lie down face uppermost on the place selected for the fireplace. A sapling is then cut, laid across the throat of the slave, and at a given signal the two nearest relatives of the host sit upon the respective ends of the sapling, thereby choking the unhappy wretch to death.

But the corner posts must receive their baptism, so four slaves are blindfolded, and one is forced to stand in each post hole, when, at a given signal, a blow on the forehead is dealt with a peculiar club ornamented with the host's coat-of-arms. More speech-making fol-

lows, the work of building commences, and is continued to the completion gratuitously by the guests, who are repaid, however, in the form of blankets given away at the subsequent house-warming.

Nowadays the same ceremonies are enacted, with the exception of the sacrifices, which are prevented by the United States authorities, who are held in great dread by the Indians.

Under Russian authority, the barbarous part of the ceremony was tacitly permitted at the instigation of the Russian-American Fur Company, through which large subsidies were paid to the government. Any attempt to prevent the sacrifices would have been certain to bring about a war with the Indians, to the destruction of a profitable fur trade.

The very young girls used to bind the hair over a bone, carved somewhat in the manner of a cotton spool, and this was the only means of distinguishing them from the boys. The custom of scalping was once customary among the Tlinkits, though now it has fallen into disuse. When the chief died he was scalped before cremation.

The scalp, together with the most showily decorated blankets of the deceased, was deposited in a most elegantly carved box, to be removed only on some festival of importance from the place of sepulture by the nearest living relative of the dead chief. On such an occasion the relative takes from the box these relics of the dear departed, and discourses upon his many virtues, while the surrounding friends are expected to lament according as their grief is revivified.

This festival lasts at least four days, and during this time the host impoverishes himself by giving away all his wealth, a proceeding which, according to the Tlinkit creed, is necessary to maintain his honor. The unlucky relative, however, is reimbursed, for, at intervals of six months or a year thereafter, other relatives of the chief give these joyful post-mortem entertainments, and in like manner squander their worldly goods. The former host is of course invited, and he always takes care never to get left.

A modified form of this custom still exists, but nowadays the host contents himself with giving away one eighth of his wealth, unless he is desirous of obtaining the chieftainship and has many blankets, in which case he will give away one fourth or one half of his goods, of which slaves constitute a great proportion. Slave-owning is not practised openly at present, although there is no doubt that many of the richer Indians possess them, and in fact one or two are known to own slaves in Sitka.

In these days of gunpowder and rifles, much of the poetry of hunting with the bow and arrow is lost, and the Indian with his old flint-lock gun is not the picturesque being of fifty years ago.

Otter-hunting used to be the most profitable industry, and is even now so among the Indians, a good sea-otter skin being worth from one to five hundred dollars.

In the days of harpoon and arrow hunting, the Indian and his wife, just before the annual spring hunting trip, bathed themselves thoroughly and put on clean clothing. The husband then, with imploring tone, besought the squaw to remain true to him during his absence, because the universal belief prevails among the Indians that violated marriage vows entail ill-success in hunting. The promise of constancy having been given by the wife, the canoe is shoved off, the husband jumps in, and the wife, while waving the departing spouse good-by, binds around her waist a robe or belt, as indicative of her intention to protect herself against the amatory incursions of other men during the absence of her lord and master, which may be one week or four months. During this time neither the husband or wife wash or remove any of their clothing.

Walter G. Chase.